David Walsh, "Entry on: Song for a Dark Queen by Rosemary Sutcliff", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2021). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1266. Entry version as of November 06, 2026.

Rosemary Sutcliff

Song for a Dark Queen

United Kingdom (1978)

TAGS: Roman Britain Roman Empire Roman History





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Song for a Dark Queen
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	Germany, Japan, United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1978
First Edition Details	Rosemary Sutcliff, *Song for a Dark Queen*. London: Pelham, 1978, 176 pp.
ISBN	9780720710601
Official Website	rosemarysutcliff.net (accessed: July 13, 2021).
Available Onllne	amazon.co.uk, kobo.com, waterstones.com (all links accessed: July 13, 2021).
Awards	1978 – The Children's Rights Workshop's "Other Award"
Genre	Historical fiction
Target Audience	Young adults
Author of the Entry	David Walsh, University of Kent, djw43@kent.ac.uk
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This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Creators



Courtesy of Anthony Lawton.

Rosemary Sutcliff , 1920 - 1992
(Author)

Award winning and internationally well-known children's writer Rosemary Sutcliff was born in Surrey, UK on December 14th, 1920. Her father was a naval officer and she spent her childhood in Malta and other naval bases. She suffered from Still's Disease, a form of juvenile arthritis, and was confined to a wheelchair for most of her life. She did not attend school or learn to read until she was nine years old, but her mother introduced her to the Saxon and Celtic legends, Icelandic sagas, the works of Rudyard Kipling, and fairy tales that became the basis for her historical fiction and other stories. After attending Art School and learning to paint miniatures, she turned to writing. She published her first book, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, in 1950, followed soon after by her best-known novel, *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1954), about the Romans in Britain. It is still in print today and been adapted into a film, TV, and radio series.

She wrote over 60 books, predominantly historical fiction for children. Her stories span settings from the Bronze Age, the Dark and Middle Ages, Elizabethan and Tudor times, the English civil war to the 1800s. In 1959 she won the Carnegie Medal for The Lantern Bearers, and was a runner up for other books. She was a runner up for the Hans Christian Andersen medal in 1974. In the same year she was made an OBE (Order of the British Empire) for her services to children's literature, and was promoted to a CBE (Commander of the British Empire) in 1992, the year she died. Two works based on Homer's epics, *Black Ships Before Troy* (1993) and *The Wanderings of Odysseus* (1995), were published posthumously. Sutcliff spent much of her later life in Walberton, Sussex, in the company of her father, house-keeper, gardener and various dogs. In her memoirs, *Blue Remembered Hills* (1983) she recounted her life up to the publication of *The Eagle of the Ninth*.

Source:

Official website (accessed: October 20, 2020).

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Additional information

Translation

German: *Lied für eine dunkle Königin*, trans. Astrid van dem Borne, Verl. Freies Geistesleben, 1996.

Japanese: *Yami no joo ni sasageru uta*, trans. Yamiko Inui, □□□, 2002.

Summary

The novel recounts the events of the Boudiccan Revolt (60/61 CE) from the perspective of the Icenian harpist Cadwan. Cadwan describes his relationship with Boudicca, from when she was a headstrong but amiable child, through to her arranged marriage to Prasutagus of the Parisi and premature elevation to the queenship, and finally Boudicca's revolt against Roman rule. Boudicca is initially resistant towards the marriage with Prasutagus, but their mutual affection grows, especially after he risks his life to save her from stampeding horses, and the union produces two daughters. When Prasutagus dies, his will gifts Nero half of the Icenian lands in an attempt to bribe the Roman government into leaving the tribe alone. However, the arrogant procurator Decianus Catus visits Boudicca to announce Rome will annex the whole kingdom regardless. When a soldier accompanying Decianus attempts to molest one of Boudicca's teenage daughters, the resulting conflict leads to the destruction of the Royal Dun, Boudicca being flogged, and her daughters raped. Subsequently, Boudicca launches a campaign to drive the Romans from Britain, with the Iceni joined by the Trinovantes and the Catuvellauni. She binds the other tribes to her cause by not allowing seeds to be sown for the harvest, meaning they will have to take supplies from the Romans, and conducting a mass sacrifice of the women from Colchester; an act she knows the Romans will never forgive. Boudicca's forces are eventually defeated by the governor Suetonius Paulinus, and both her daughters are killed in the battle. Boudicca, despite being wounded, is carried back to the Icenian lands by Cadwan, where she kills herself by taking poison. Several chapters conclude with letters from a young Gnaeus Julius Agricola, the future governor of Britain, to his mother in southern Gaul, describing his role in, and feelings about, the conflict.

Analysis

Although the focus of the novel is Boudicca's life, as with all of

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Sutcliff's works the story is recounted from a male perspective, which was at least partly the result of Sutcliff having been raised in what she described as a more "male-orientated" fashion for the time (Sutcliff 1983, p. 55). The characters of Agricola and Cadawan to some extent both fit the standard model of Sutcliff's Romano-British heroes, whereby they exhibit qualities including bravery, loyalty, aid others who are in need, and are willing to disagree with their superiors if they feel they are acting in an amoral fashion. Such characters serve a didactic role to encourage younger readers to develop similar qualities, as Sutcliff explained in her essay "History is People" (1973, p. 306): "... I do try to put over to the child reading any book of mine some kind of ethic, a set of values... I try to show the reader that doing the right/kind/brave/honest thing doesn't have to result in any concrete reward... and that doesn't matter." Both characters also display a sense of self-doubt, although particularly in the case of Agricola we know he will overcome this and become a famous general and governor, which could provide some comfort to children and teenagers who are also plagued by anxieties.

Moreover, the good character of the future governor Agricola provides an indication that Roman rule will have benefits, despite the revolt having begun in the aftermath of Decianus's cruelty. This is often the case with other post-war novels set in this period, such as Treece's *Red Queen, White Queen* (1958) and Seton's *The Mistletoe and Sword* (1955). Additionally, readers may also be aware that in Sutcliff's most famous work, *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1954), set in the early second century, the former centurion Marcus is betrothed to Cottia, who is from the Iceni, and thus it will not be long after the revolt that the two sides have begun to fully integrate.

A key theme in the novel is how loss and tragedy affect a person, especially at a young age. In this case, Boudicca becomes increasingly hardened due to various losses she suffers that propel her first to the queenship and later into the conflict with the Romans. Such events appear to have all the more impact on her due to her age, much to Cadwan's lament: she loses her mother at the age of four; loses her father, becomes queen, and is married at the age of 15; and becomes a mother aged 16. Subsequently, the story would be particularly relevant to children who have suffered the loss of a parent at a young age and must take on greater responsibilities as a result, while it would also perhaps resonate with young mothers who are left to raise their child without family or spousal support.

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Another theme is the role of a divine monarchy, with Boudicca not only a queen but the earthly representative, and perhaps even the personification, of the Mother Goddess (Talcroft 1996, pp. 43–46). As Cadawan observes, the dual nature of the Mother Goddess is reflected in the actions of Boudicca, for she is a mother and leader, but also capable of causing great destruction and death. Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1906–1915), an anthropological study that includes discussion on divinity and monarchy, almost certainly served as an influence here given Sutcliff's love of his works (Fisher 1974, p. 186).

The story is an adaption of the Boudiccan Revolt recounted in the works of Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.29–37) and Cassius Dio (62.1–12). Sutcliff also drew on Spence's *Boadicea* (1937) and Burn's *Agricola and Roman Britain* (1953), and she credited Lethbridge's *Witches: Investigating an Ancient Religion* (1962) and *Gogmagog* (1957) for inspiring her to present the Iceni as a matriarchy. A discussion of the sources Sutcliff used for each novel can be found in Talcroft's (1995) study.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Roman Britain Roman Empire Roman History
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adversity Coming of age Conflict Death Emotions Family Gender, female Hierarchy Historical figures Identity Justice Nation Resilience Storytelling Values Violence

Further Reading

Burn, Andrew Robert, *Agricola and Roman Britain*, London: English Universities Press, 1953.

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Tacitus, *Annals*: Books 13–16, trans. John Jackson, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937.

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